

# Admonishing

## A paradoxical pragmatic behaviour in ancient China

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This paper examines the pragmatic properties of what we define as a ritual act of ‘admonishing’. We argue that admonishing represents a historically embedded realisation type of the speech act Suggest. We explore admonishing in ancient Chinese political and governance texts dated before the 2nd century BC. The results of our analysis show that admonishing often not only affords but even triggers paradoxical pragmatic behaviour. This paradox stems from the fact that, in many historical linguacultures like the ancient Chinese, admonishing was directed at a recipient, most typically a ruler, who was more highly ranked than the admonisher himself. While this context normally precluded threatening the recipient’s face, admonishing was realised in a ritual frame in which such a face threat was deindividuated. In pragmatics, a research gap exists in the study of the historical act of admonishing, and so the current study fills a knowledge gap.

**Keywords:** admonishing, speech act, Suggest, ancient China, ritual

### 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the pragmatic properties of what we define as the act of ‘admonishing’. In our view, admonishing represents a realisation type of the speech act category Suggest[do-x]/[not-to-do-x] (cf. Edmondson and House 1981; House and Kádár 2021). While ancient Chinese admonishing has many distinctive pragmatic characteristics that sets it apart from other everyday realisation modes of Suggest, we subsume admonishing under the illocutionary category of Suggest (see more in Section 3). This categorisation is important to appropriately

integrate the phenomenon under investigation into replicable speech act theory. As House & Kádár (2021) argue

should we want our research to be extremely ‘innovative’, it would be straightforward to claim that we somehow ‘discovered’ a new speech act! However, such a discovery would seriously violate Searle’s (1976) principle that speech act categories should not be proliferated *ad libitum* ...

Indeed, according to Searle (1976), speech act categories should be finite. While in this paper we adopt a more detailed, empirical and interactional speech act typology than Searle’s (1976) (see more in Edmondson and House 1981; House and Kádár 2021), we definitely agree with Searle’s ‘admonishment’ to keep speech act categories on the minimum.<sup>1</sup> We approach speech acts as a part of broader discourse (see our model in Figure 1), which clearly goes beyond Searle’s (1976) conception of speech acts.

When one realises admonishing, he engages in a performative ritual act, often in an unmitigated fashion (see an overview of performative ritual acts in Kádár 2017). Unlike many other forms of Suggest, admonishing is historically embedded (cf. Bax 1981). The act of admonishing is apparent in historical forms of discourse in a number of linguacultures: in many parts of the world, including China, Egypt (Lichtheim 1976), ancient Europe (see an overview in Dauphinais and Levering 2005), Renaissance Italy (e.g. Tasca 2004) and suchlike, admonishing was a culturally important act. In historical European linguacultures, for instance, there was a particular theological genre – ecclesiastical discourse – associated with this act, whereas in China admonishing was a key part of ancient literary discourse on state governance.

As our study will demonstrate, admonishing is an act worth investigating, not only for the historian but also for experts in the fields of pragmatics. This is because admonishing often not only affords but even triggers paradoxical pragmatic behaviour. This paradox stems from the fact that, in many historical linguacultures, admonishing was directed at a recipient – most typically a ruler – who was more highly ranked than the admonisher himself. As a case study, we explore data drawn from sources dating from before the 2nd century BC, i.e. the ancient period of Classical Chinese. In Chinese, the subject of our research is called *jian* 諫, a Chinese expression used for ‘admonishing’ in political and governance contexts.

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1. Following the convention of Edmondson and House (1981) and House and Kádár (2021), we capitalise speech act categories in this paper. Accordingly, admonishing does not occur in capital because it is a mode of realisation (or, realisation type) of the speech act category Suggest.

## 2. Review of literature

In pragmatic theory, admonishing has only received moderate attention. Previous research mainly defined ‘admonish(ing)’ as a specific ‘speech act’. Such research includes, for example, Reinach (see an overview of Reinach’s early work in DuBois 2002), as well as various studies on Chinese pragmatics (e.g. Chen 2011). As we have outlined in Section 1, our current study differs from such previous research in that we define admonishing as realisation type of the speech act category Suggest.

In historical pragmatics, in particular, a limited number of studies have analysed the act of admonishing in various linguacultural settings, including Chinese (Shen and Chen 2019), Old English (Green 1995), Middle English (Hostetler 2012), the French classical period (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2011) and, of course, the Bible (e.g. Houston 1993). While various scholars, such as Hostetler (2012), have drawn attention to the face-threatening nature of admonishing, the majority of previous research has focused on admonishing in family contexts where the admonisher is higher ranked than the admonished (for an exception see e.g. Shen and Chen 2019). Admonishing powerful political actors, such as rulers, was also quite common in many historical linguacultures, as the following extract indicates:

Trajanus called his senate his father; for as the father doth foretell his son of the good or ill that may befall him, so ought the senate to admonish the king of things profitable, and unprofitable, to him and the state.

(Cobbett’s *Parliamentary History of England*, Volume 1, 1049)

Of all the examples from ‘Western’ linguacultures, it is perhaps the Bible which most clearly illustrates the historical importance of admonishing because it includes numerous cases in which the kings of ancient Israel were admonished by the prophets (see an overview in Petersen 2002). It is thus somewhat surprising that such highly face-threatening instances of interaction have received little attention in historical pragmatics.

However, scholars have not completely neglected the study of admonishing directed at those in power. For instance, McCabe (2008, 233) distinguishes the speech act category ‘Divine Judgement’ in the context of the Bible – although setting up such a separate speech act category appears to us to be an unnecessary terminological proliferation (see our argument in Section 1). In a similar fashion, Houston (1993) focuses on prophetic ‘judgements’ when describing face threats in the Old Testament. In the current paper, we follow our previously introduced approach to admonishing by subsuming it under the speech act category ‘Suggest’. It should be noted that while some scholars such as Kallia (2005) made a distinc-

tion between the speech act categories ‘Suggest’ and ‘Advise’, they are more often used interchangeably in pragmatics (e.g. Kohnen 1999, 181). We agree with this latter view, and in order to integrate our discussion into the speech act typology used in Edmondson and House (1981) and House and Kádár (2021), we only use the term ‘Suggest’. We base our definition of Suggest on Edmondson and House (1981, 124) who define Suggest as follows:

The Suggest as an illocution is analysed as the case in which a speaker communicates that he is in favour of H’s [i.e. the hearer’s] performing a future action as in H’s own interests, while in the case of the Request, the future action to be performed by H was claimed to be in the interests of the speaker. ... Thus, while we intend that the distinction between our terms Request and Suggest reflect a semantic distinction between the terms REQUEST and SUGGEST as lexical items, we may well find a Requestive term such as BEG used in the making of a Suggest, and the term SUGGEST used to make what would seem quite clearly to be a Request:

- Do go and see a doctor about it, I beg you
- I suggest you let me get on with my work now

What makes certain forms of admonishing difficult to study resides in the paradoxical feature of this act, which we briefly mentioned in Section 1 and will discuss in more detail in Section 3, i.e. that admonishing may not only be provided from a power position but also by the non-powerful side. In Ancient Chinese studied in this paper, the relevance of power relations in the act of admonishing is indicated beautifully at the lexical level because Classical Chinese uses two distinct characters for ‘admonishing’, namely:

- *xun* 訓: a term used to describe an instance of admonishment which is delivered by a person in power, such as a father admonishing his child;
- *jian* 諫: a term which describes an instance of admonishment delivered by a minister to a ruler, or a lower-ranking person towards a higher-ranking one.

*Jian*, as a culturally embedded act, has been widely studied in Chinese academia, albeit primarily outside the realm of pragmatics: Chinese scholars have approached the study of *jian* principally in the fields of literature and political science. Those linguists who have explored *jian* have mainly focused on its stylistic (see Han 2018; Ke 2012; Ning 2012) and rhetorical characteristics (see He 2003; Mao and Hou 2007). For example, Ke (2012) explored the classification and stylistic characteristics of *jian* as a genre during the pre-imperial period, i.e. the Qin Dynasty during 221–206 BC which first united China as an empire. Based on this data, Ke (2012) created a replicable literary typology for the study of *jian* sources. Ning (2012) explored the relationship between the pre-Qin political system and

*jian* as a literary and political genre. Mao and Hou (2007) conducted an insightful exploration of the rhetoric of *jian* by focusing on this act in post-ancient Chinese history.

These studies reveal that, in ancient China, admonishing the ruler on matters of governance had long been regarded as a moral obligation of loyal officials and, therefore, became an institutionalised form of ritual behaviour (see Kádár et al. 2020). For instance, during imperial China, an institutional official rank (*jian-guan* 諫官 ‘admonishing official’) was created: officials fulfilling this role were duty-bound to critically admonish the ruler when this was perceived to be necessary. Consequently, in historical China, admonishments were not *ad hoc* in nature, but were conducted in the form of ceremonies. Admonishing the ruler was not without its dangers: just as various Speakers of the British Parliament were executed over the centuries (see Bull, Fetzer and Kádár 2020), various outspoken Chinese officials were also executed, lost their careers or were exiled to remote parts of the empire (cf. Zeng 2019). As a result of the dangers that were associated with admonishing, ritual customs were designed to ‘purify’ the participants. Officials performing the act of admonishing wore a special ceremonial robe which differed from the ordinary, highly adorned clothes that officials normally wore in court. Both the ruler and the officials fasted before the rite of admonishing commenced (Cai 2009).

While, as previously mentioned, a number of studies have captured various important elements of *jian* as a literary genre, the amount of historical pragmatic research that has been undertaken into *jian* is negligible. An important exception to this is a recent paper by Shen and Chen (2019) which studied the pragmatics of *jian* in imperial China. Although Shen and Chen (2019) provide a very useful politeness-related summary of *jian* – by presenting it as an act threatening both the face and the power of the ruler – they do not attempt to approach *jian* from a speech act perspective. Another historical pragmatics-driven study which is worth mentioning here is Zhu (2005), in which the pragmatic strategies and cognitive pragmatics of *jian* are discussed. Zhu (2005) is mainly anchored in rhetoric rather than pragmatic theory.

As the above review of literature has shown, our speech act-based inquiry into *jian* in ancient China is designed to fill a notable research gap. Note that by focusing on speech acts we propose a view which includes both the study of expressions through which a speech act is realised and the role of speech acts in discourse, including the ritual frame in which admonishing occurs. By so doing, we move away from the conventional view which regards speech act as a category to be studied on the utterance level only (see a detailed overview in House and Kádár 2021).

3. Data and methodology

Our corpus includes 362 occurrences of admonishing which were chosen on the basis of our definition of admonishing, as a realisation type of Suggest. In order to test whether ancient Chinese realisations of admonishing suit our theoretical definition, before engaging in a corpus investigation of a large scope, we conducted a small pilot study by examining the ancient Chinese Classic *The Commentary of Zuo* (*Zuozhuan* 左传). Note that in our research we focused only on cases in which admonishing is made to a ruler. Our pilot study revealed that instances of admonishing not only include cases in which the Chinese character occurs as a metaterm referring to the act of admonishing, but all other cases in which a Suggest is realised in a face/power-threatening sense (cf. Shen and Chen 2019).

Our corpus consists of the following sources:

Table 1. Overview of sources that form our *jian* corpus

Source	Summary	Number of admonishments
1. <i>Zuozhuan</i> 左傳 <i>The Commentary of Zuo</i>	An ancient chronicle of 30 chapters covering a period from 722 to 468 BC, which focuses primarily on political, diplomatic and military affairs from that era. This work was composed during the 4th century BC.	157
2. <i>Yanzi Chunqiu</i> 晏子春秋 <i>Annals of Master Yan</i>	An ancient Chinese text from the Warring States Period (475–221 BC). This text contains a collection of stories, speeches and remonstrations that have been attributed to Yan Ying, a famous official from the State of Qi.	74
3. <i>Shiji</i> 史記 <i>Records of the Grand Historian</i>	The history of ancient China that was completed around 94 BC.	51
4. <i>Guoyu</i> 國語 <i>Discourses of the States</i>	An ancient Chinese text that consists of a collection of speeches which have been attributed to rulers and other men from the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BC).	37
5. <i>Lüshi Chunqiu</i> 呂氏春秋 <i>Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals</i>	An encyclopaedic Chinese text that was compiled around 239 BC.	21

Table 1. (continued)

Source	Summary	Number of admonishments
6. <i>Zhan Guo Ce</i> 戰國策 <i>Annals of the Warring States</i>	An ancient collection of anecdotes of political manipulation and warfare during the Warring States period.	10
7. <i>Guanzi</i> 管子 <i>Master Guan</i>	A political and philosophical text that is named after and has traditionally been attributed to the 7th century BCE philosopher and statesman, Guan Zhong.	12

Our corpus consists only of multiple-source, rather than single-source (cf. House 1986), manifestations of *jian*, i.e. we are focusing on instances in which the admonishment is made in the form of a dialogue between a minister, or a philosopher, and the ruler of a kingdom. As mentioned before, all the sources studied date from before the 2nd century BC, i.e. the ancient period of Classical Chinese. During this time, i.e. before China was united by the Qin Dynasty in 221 BC, various countries fought for hegemony over the empire. *Jian* flourished during this tumultuous period because it was regarded as a minister's sacred duty to help his ruler overcome perils and secure victory over other countries by admonishing him if an error in governance had occurred/was perceived to be looming (see e.g. Galvany 2012).

It is worth noting that Classical Chinese was essentially a written language. Therefore, it is likely that the instances of admonishing that are studied in this paper were reconstructed and edited after the actual events had taken place – which could, potentially, be quite some time later. However, since ancient *jian* can only be accessed by using sources that are similar to the ones we are employing, we do not think that our corpus is somehow ‘imperfect’ as that would raise broader concerns regarding the validity of historical pragmatic data in general (see Jacobs and Jucker 1995). Also, as part of this approach, we do not examine whether a particular historical event in our corpus actually took place, as we consider this aspect to be of secondary importance to the historical pragmatic study of the realisation of admonishing.

Our research is anchored in the historical pragmatic analysis of the ways in which the unit of speech act is embedded in interaction. Brinton (2001) defines this approach as ‘diachronically oriented discourse analysis’, while Jacobs and Jucker (1995) refer to it as ‘diachronic pragmatics’. It is important to emphasise here again that, according to House and Kádár (2021), speech act is inseparable from discourse, and as part of studying the unit speech act we need to focus on

both of its realisation through expressions and the ways in which it is embedded in discourse.

Accordingly, in this paper we analyse two different aspects of our corpus:

- Lexical expressions which indicate the ‘standard situation’ (House 1989) and the related ritual frame of ceremonial admonishments. As House (1989, 115) argues, in daily interactions there are various standard situations, i.e. scenarios in which all participants are aware of their rights and obligations, and in which facework is barely felt necessary. As Kádár and House (2020), and House and Kádár (2021) point out, standard situations are often ritual, and expressions that indicate standard situations can be referred to as ‘ritual frame indicating expressions’ (RFIEs). It is important to note that not all standard situations are devoid of facework: for instance, highly ritual ceremonies in which facework is of great importance are also standard for those who participate in them. In methodological terms, the departure point for the analysis of expressions in our corpus is the following: if an expression is found to frequently occur in face-threatening admonishments, then it is very likely that this expression, in some way, indicates that the given admonishment is part of a ritual, i.e. the official or philosopher who realises admonishing as a form of Suggest has a certain sense of right or is even obliged to perform it.
- On the discourse level, we identified recurrent – and, as such, conventionalised – patterns by which instances of admonishing are realised in our corpus. We have defined these means as ‘discursive practices’ to avoid using the term ‘strategy’ as employed by Brown and Levinson (1987) because, as part of the aforementioned paradox, the discursive practices that are being studied here increased, rather than decreased, the face threat that admonishing normally implied. For example, as our analysis below will demonstrate, the admonisher often negatively compared the ruler to the ruler’s father to give increased force to his admonishment (see Example (6)).

The following Figure 1 illustrates the operation of our analytic procedure:

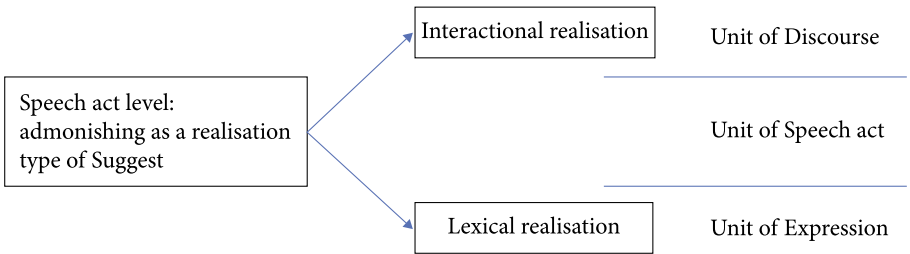


Figure 1. Our analytic procedure



Figure 1 embodies our argument (see House and Kádár 2021) that different pragmatic units cannot be studied in a separate way: when it comes to the unit of speech act, we need to systematically consider its lexical and interactional (discourse level) realisations. In the case of studying admonishing, the realisations are highly conventionalised, considering the admonishing triggers a ritual frame (see Kádár and House 2020), in which rights and obligation and related pragmatic conventions are very clear to all participants involved. It is worth to note in passing that the analytic procedure described in Figure 1 can be modified, depending on which unit is in our focus. For instance, when we analyse discourse, we may want to explore recurrent lexical and speech act realisations through which a type of discourse comes into existence (see House and Kádár 2021).

Although corpora consisting of ancient literature like ours are relatively modest in size, we conducted a quantitative analysis of the above-discussed units of analysis, in order to test whether the phenomena we investigate are properly conventionalised, hence reflecting patterns of ritual language use. We are, of course, aware that our quantitative results are based on a historical corpus; we therefore do not intend to propose any unwarranted generalisations.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 Setting the scene: Admonishing as a paradoxical phenomenon

As we have noted in Section 1, admonishing manifests itself as a paradox. In other circumstances, any situation in which a clear hierarchy applies would prevent threatening the face of the higher-ranking participant; criticising a ruler who was invested with absolute power and sacred celestial-like status would thus have had serious consequences. However, as we will show in the current analysis, the act of admonishing operated within an ‘interactional ritual frame’ (Kádár and House 2020), which facilitated the crossing of the boundary between sacred ruler and his subordinate. By following the conventions of this ritual frame, the admonishing official could express a view which, according to him, best served the interest of the ruler. This is where our paradox resides, at least from a modern etic perspective; that is, unlike in ordinary circumstances, within a ritual frame of admonishing, the admonisher had specific rights and obligations that allowed him to use language in ways that would have normally transgressed the status-related boundaries between himself and the ruler. Of course, this was subject to the fact that an admonishment was realised in an institutionalised ceremonial fashion, and was not *ad hoc* in nature. This paradox meant that an admonishment was conducted by using conventionalised tools to express directness, and this seems to contra-

dict – from a modern etic point of view – the face threat that the admonishment might create.

It is important to bear in mind that not all forms of admonishment include this sense of paradox. That is, the paradox only emerges if we examine admonishing in a ruler-subordinate relationship (see Section 2).

4.2 RFIEs indicating the ritual frame of admonishing and expressions downgrading their force

The examination of our corpus shows that when ministers and philosophers admonished their rulers, they frequently deployed a limited inventory of RFIEs to indicate that the admonishment was part of an institutionalised ritual practice. These RFIEs were often embedded in the conventionalised discursive practices that facilitated the realisation of admonishing, and they indicated awareness of the ritual situation holding for the participants, and the related rights and obligations. By deploying an RFIE conventionally associated with admonishing as a realisation type of the speech act Suggest, historical Chinese officials not only indicated their awareness of the ceremonial situation holding for the participants, but also framed admonishing as a conventional realisation of a ritual Suggest.

It should be noted that Classical Chinese is a heavily formulaic, written medium: Classical Chinese texts not only frequent formulaic prose (e.g. four-character units) but they also tend to be heavily loaded with honorifics and other formal expressions. The frequency with which certain formulae are used to realise admonishing as a ritual Suggest is therefore particularly important in the current research: if a particular formulaic expression is frequently used when a ritual Suggest is performed, then this expression indicates a ritual frame. The following Table 2 summarises the RFIEs that were found to indicate the ritual frame of admonishing in our corpus:

Table 2. Types and frequency of RFIEs in the corpus

RFIE	Number of occurrences	
	in the corpus	Relative frequency
<i>jin</i> 今 ‘in present times’	122	33.7%
<i>xi</i> 昔 ‘in ancient times’	27	7.5%
<i>gu... jin...</i> 古... 今... ‘in old times... presently...’	20	5.5%
<i>buke</i> 不可 ‘no, you should not’	65	18.0%
<i>weike</i> 未可 ‘no, you should not’	2	0.5%

It should be noted that the figures in Table 2 represent relative and not absolute frequencies, that is, the table shows the number of instances of admonishment (out of a total of 362 in our corpus) in which RFIEs were deployed. As the figures in the Table indicate, 2 RFIEs – which we have highlighted in grey – are particularly frequent in our corpus, while the remaining 3 RFIEs are their variants. Even if a particular expression qualifies as an RFIE, this does not mean that it somehow ‘belong’ to a specific ritual setting. Rather, its frequency indicates that a particular speech act realisation pattern is ritual.

In terms of pragmatic use, the RFIEs in Table 2 can be divided into two different but interrelated groups. The first group which includes *jin* 今 ‘in present times’ and its variants *xi* 昔 ‘in ancient times’ and *gu... jin... 古... 今...* ‘in old times... presently...’ refer to a precedent, from which the speech act Suggest can be deduced. Referring to precedents is a common practice in many ceremonial, institutionalised standard situations, spanning courtrooms to church ceremonies, and so it is evident that, in the ritual speech act realisation type of admonishing, these RFIEs indicate that the Suggest is not *ad hoc* in nature but rather is part of a ceremony. In a highly face-threatening situation, such as admonishing a sacred ruler, it is fundamentally important to ‘disarm’ (cf. Edmondson and House 1981) any face threat by deindividuating (cf. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2015) the admonisher. By so doing, the admonisher’s realisation of Suggest is more likely to be interpreted within a ritual frame. The following Example (1) illustrates the use of the RFIE *jin*:

- (1) 晏子曰：“臣聞明君必務正其治，以事利民，然后子孫享之。詩雲：‘武王豈不事，貽厥孫謀，以燕翼子。’今君處佚怠，逆政害民有日矣，而猶出若言，不亦甚乎！”《晏子春秋》<sup>2</sup>

Master Yan<sup>2</sup> said, “This minister (i.e. ‘I’) heard that a wise monarch governs the state with appropriacy, implements policies favourable to the people, in order to benefit future generations.” The *Book of Odes* says, ‘King Wu of the Zhou Dynasty<sup>3</sup> took his role as a king very seriously, so his deeds were passed down to later generations and benefitted his descendants.’ *At present* (*jin*), you, my lord, are loitering and care for nothing. You have violated the rules of governance and have harmed the people for a long time. How can you speak like this [referring to the words of the ruler that triggered the admonishment]? Is this not highly inappropriate? (*Annals of Master Yan*)<sup>4</sup>

2. Master Yan is a deferential reference to Yan Ying, the author of the *Annals of Master Yan*.  
 3. King Wu was a highly respected ancient ruler.  
 4. All translations in this paper are our own.

Many present-day readers might well be surprised by the harsh tone of the admonishment in the above Example (1). In ancient China, admonishing could in fact be very direct, although this directness was mitigated in a number of ways, most notably by honorific ‘downgraders’ (Edmondson 1981) which were used as deferential forms of address and self-reference.<sup>5</sup> Table 3 below indicates the two most frequently occurring downgraders in our corpus:

Table 3. Frequently used honorific expressions in the corpus

Expression	Number of admonishments which included the expression (out of a total of 362)	Relative frequency
1. <i>jun</i> 君 ‘you, my lord’	288	79.6%
2. <i>chen</i> 臣 ‘I, this minister’	109	30.1%

As Table 3 illustrates, in the majority of cases in our corpus the admonisher deploys downgrading forms of address or self-reference. What is important here is the high frequency with which these downgraders occur. One could justifiably argue that these forms of address and self-reference were used in many different settings outside of the ruler-official relationship. However, in such settings these expressions were generally used much less frequently for admonishing purposes. This tendency is logical when one considers that, in historical linguacultures such as the ancient Chinese, being disrespectful towards a ruler was a deadly sin (see Kádár 2007; Chen 2019). Thus, it is evident that the harshness witnessed in the admonishment was only possible because the setting was institutionalised, and honorifics reinforced this sense of institutionalisation, as the following example illustrates:

- (2) 晏子曰：“昔文王不敢盤於游田，故國昌而民安。楚靈王不廢干溪之役，起章華之台，而民叛之。今君不革，將危社稷，而為諸侯笑。臣聞忠臣不避死，諫不違罪。君不聽臣，臣將逝矣。”《晏子春秋》
- Master Yan said, “In ancient times, King Wen<sup>6</sup> knew that he should not squander his time by indulging in hunting, and his kingdom was prosperous, and the people enjoyed peace. King Chuling,<sup>7</sup> however, led his country into the War of the Creek of Gan and during the war he even built the Palace of Zhanghua at very high cost, and it was not surprising that his people finally revolted. If today you, my lord (*jun*), fail to implement reforms, the kingdom

5. In pragmatic theory, although Japanese and Korean are usually referred to as the main ‘honorific rich languages’ (see e.g. Ide 1989), historical Chinese is also considered to be an honorific-rich linguacultures (Pan and Kádár 2011a; b). For an overview of addressing phenomenon in Chinese, see He and Ren (2016).

will be at a great risk and you will be mocked by the dukes. This minister (*chen*) heard that faithful ministers are not afraid of death, and advisers are not afraid of being punished. If you, my lord (*jun*), do not take the advice of this minister (*chen*), this minister (*chen*) is ready to step down”

(*Annals of Master Yan*)

In Example (2), the honorific term *jun* occurs twice and *chen* three times. It is important to note here that historical Chinese honorifics were very strongly indexical in nature (Agha 1998), that is, each honorific indicated a very specific relationship between the speaker and the recipient (see Kádár 2007). For example, the above honorifics were used exclusively by state ministers who had the institutional right to admonish the ruler in ancient China. This had a fundamental consequence for the role of these honorifics as downgraders. That is, in a context in which the face and power of the ruler was threatened (see Shen and Chen 2019), uttering these terms, and hence indexically showcasing awareness of the relationship holding for the situation and the related authority of the ruler, ensured that the situation became safer for the admonisher.

Another RFIE group which is salient in our corpus is *buke* 不可 (lit. ‘you cannot’) and its variant *weike* 未可, both of which indicate strong moral opposition when the speaker realises Suggest in the form of an admonishment. These expressions are very direct, and therefore it is evident that they could only ever be deployed as part of an institutionalised ritual practice:

- (3) 伍員曰：“不可。臣聞之：樹德莫如滋，去疾莫如盡...” 《左傳》

Wu Yuan<sup>8</sup> said to the king: “No, you should not (*buke*). This minister heard the following: “Morality should be nurtured at all times, until all evil is eradicated. ...”

(*Zuozhuan*)

In our corpus, the RFIE *buke* almost always occurs at the beginning of an admonishment, and any mitigation, including the aforementioned honorifics, tend to follow it. The fact that this RFIE was deployed as an introductory move in the admonishment implies that it operated as a ceremonial form at the start of the admonishment.

Other expressions in our corpus function as boosters of the directness expressed by the RFIE *buke*. Most significantly, various officials deploy the imperative adverb *qi* 其 in their admonishments:

6. King Wen, a mythical king, was highly respected in Chinese culture.

7. King Chuling ruled the ancient Kingdom of Chu between 540 and 529 BC.

8. Wu Yun (526–484 BC) was a general and politician in the ancient Kingdom of Wu.

- (4) 公曰：“魯可取乎？”對曰：“不可，猶秉周禮。周禮，所以本也。臣聞之，國將亡，本必先顛，而后枝葉從之。魯不棄周禮，未可動也。君其務寧魯難而親之。...”《左傳》

The lord asked: “May we seize the state by force?” The advisor said: “No, you cannot (*buke*). For the state of Lu continues to follow the rites of Zhou and these rites are the foundation of any state.<sup>9</sup> This minister has heard the following: a state’s destruction is like a tree. The trunk falls down first, and the twigs and leaves follow it. We cannot destroy Lu because it has its sacred rites. You, my lord, must (*qi*) help Lu to resolve its inner turmoil and form an alliance with it. ...” (Zuozhuan)

Following this overview of RFIEs and other expressions through which admonishing as a realisation type of Suggest operated according to our corpus, let us now examine two discursive practices in which admonishing was embedded.

### 4.3 Discursive practice 1: Referring to historical figures

An important discursive practice that was used to realise the admonishing was the practice of referring to historical figures. In our corpus of 362 instances of admonishment, making reference to historical figures occurs in 71 cases, i.e. this represents a conventional and hence ritual practice with a frequency of occurrence of 19.6%. A number of the examples analysed in Section 4.1 feature this discursive practice and, in the following, we provide an overview of the different ways in which it occurred. While this ritual discursive practice can significantly increase the length of the admonishment and, as such, it may seem to be a discursive ‘detour’, it appears to have functioned as justification for the admonishment by providing a precedent. Here the length of the admonishment does not correlate with indirectness, and therefore it would be inappropriate to refer to this practice as a ‘mitigatory strategy’.

#### 4.3.1 *Contrasting the ruler with an ancient sovereign*

A standard form of the aforementioned discursive practice includes those cases where the admonishing official contrasted the current ruler with an ancient mythical king, in the form of an open criticism. The following example illustrates the realisation of this type of admonishment:

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9. Here the adviser – Zhongsun Qiu 仲孫湫 (circa. 5th century BC) – refers to the fact that the Kingdom of Lu, unlike other kingdoms, continued to use the sacred source *Zhouli* 周禮 (*The Rites of Zhou*) in matters of daily governance.

- (5) 御孫諫曰：“臣聞之：‘儉，德之共也；侈，惡之大也。’先君有共德而君納諸大惡，無乃不可乎！”《左傳》

Yu Sun advised: “This minister (*chen*) has heard that frugality is the greatest moral virtue and extravagance is the greatest evil. The ancient kings were endowed with this greatest of all virtues, but you, my lord (*jun*) indulge yourself in the greatest evil. How can this be appropriate?” (*Zuo zhuan*)

Despite its directness, this discursive practice of unfavourably comparing the ruler with a highly respected predecessor was considered to be a conventional ritual realisation of admonishing due to the paradox mentioned above. In other words, the minister who deployed this discursive practice simultaneously realised a rather direct Suggest as an admonishment and downgraded it with honorifics, thereby indicating that he accepted the king's authority (see Section 4.1).

#### 4.3.2 *Contrasting the ruler with his father*

While Example (5) is already face-threatening in nature, this sense of face threat appears to be further exacerbated when the admonisher refers to the ruler's immediate predecessor, by claiming that the latter was a better leader than his son. The following example illustrates this discursive practice:

- (6) (晏子)對曰：“...昔者先君桓公之地狹於今，修法治，廣政教，以霸諸侯。...今君不免成城之求，而惟傾城之務，國之亡日至矣。君其圖之！”《晏子春秋》

Master Yan said: “In the past, the former lord, Duke Huan,<sup>10</sup> governed a state which was smaller than your kingdom today. However, he changed the law, hence dominating the princes. ... Now, you, my lord (*jun*), failed to rule the land and engage in actions that could overturn the state. Thus, this country is doomed. You must (*qi*) consider this, my lord (*jun*).” (*Annals of Master Yan*)

In this example, the contrast between the current ruler and his father is made in an even more forceful manner when the official uses the previously discussed imperative adverb *qi* (see Section 4.1) to urge the ruler to reform. In a similar way to the previous Example (5), the extreme directness of admonishing is paradoxically counterbalanced by the use of honorifics to indicate acceptance of the ruler's authority.

#### 4.3.3 *Providing both good and bad examples for the ruler*

Another way to realise the discursive practice being studied here is to simultaneously provide good and bad examples for the ruler. This is illustrated in the following example:

10. Duke Huan ruled the Kingdom of Qi between 685 and 643 BC.

- (7) 楚子示諸侯侈，椒舉曰：“夫六王二公之事，皆所以示諸侯禮也，諸侯所由用命也。夏桀為仍之會，有緡叛之。商紂為黎之蒐，東夷叛之。周幽為大室之盟，戎狄叛之。皆所以示諸侯汰也，諸侯所由棄命也。今君以汰，無乃不濟乎？”《左傳》

King Ling of Chu showed arrogance towards the princes of other states. His minister Jiao Ju said: “The former Kings and Dukes treated the sovereigns of other states with courtesy, which is why their wish was respected. However, when King Jie of the Xia Dynasty<sup>11</sup> held the Assembly of Reng, the state of You Min revolted against him; when King Zhou of the Shang Dynasty held the Military Parade of Li, the tribe of East Yi betrayed him; when King You of the Zhou Dynasty made the Covenant of Taishi, the tribes of Rong and Di betrayed him. In all these cases, the princes revolted against the kings because they were treated most arrogantly. Now, you, my lord (*jun*) also show an arrogant manner towards your princes. How can this be appropriate?” (*Zuozhuan*)

In this case, while the historical precedent is lengthy and includes both positive and negative examples, it does not make the admonishment any less direct, and it is worth noting that negative precedents form the larger part of such narratives. Again, the paradox is visible here because the official realising this direct form of admonishment is, at the same time, indicating that he accepts the authority of the ruler by deploying the honorific form of address *jun*. Furthermore, as he closes his admonishing, he adds a rhetorical question which downgrades the force of this ritual Suggest.

#### 4.4 Discursive practice 2: Quoting ancient sources

As Stanley (2004) argues, using quotations as a form of rhetoric is a fundamental pragmatic device in *Paul's Letters* and other ancient European sources. One can observe a similar discursive practice in our ancient Chinese corpus: here the admonisher often uses one or more archaic sources to frame the admonishment. In our corpus, the most important of these sources is *The Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經) and, to a lesser degree, *The Book of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書). The former is the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry which comprises 305 works dating from the 11th to the 7th century BC, while the latter is an ancient collection of prose attributed to mythical figures. Soon after these two works were compiled, they were already considered to be ‘classical’ works in Ancient China and, as we will discuss in more detail below, they were believed to be sacred (see also e.g.

11. The mythical king, King Jie – along with other kings mentioned at this section – was regarded as an archetype of a bad ruler in historical Chinese texts.



Chen 2017). Table 4 summarises the number and frequency with which ancient sources were quoted in our corpus:

**Table 4.** The frequency with which ancient sources were quoted in our corpus

Source	Number of quotes	Frequency
<i>The Book of Odes, Daya</i> 大雅 ( <i>Major Court Hymns</i> ) Section	11	3%
<i>The Book of Odes, Xiaoya</i> 小雅 ( <i>Lesser Court Hymns</i> ) Section	11	3%
<i>The Book of Odes, Zhou Song</i> 周頌 ( <i>Eulogies of Zhou</i> ) Section	6	1.7%
<i>The Book of Odes, Guofeng</i> 國風 ( <i>Airs of the States</i> ) Section	3	0.8%
<i>The Book of Documents</i>	15	4.1%
<i>Other sources</i>	10	2.8%
<i>Total</i>	<b>56</b>	<b>15.5%</b>

As Table 4 shows, quoting ancient sources – occurring 56 times in our corpus – was a standard discursive practice in ancient China. This practice is similar to the previously discussed discursive practice of referring to historical figures and events (Section 4.2).

When one examines the figures in Table 4, a notable historical pragmatic pattern emerges: when ministers and philosophers admonished their rulers, they preferred to quote sources regarded as ‘reference material’ by royalty and the aristocracy. According to Table 4, *The Book of Odes* was by far the most commonly quoted reference, and admonishers referred most frequently to the *Daya* 大雅 (*Major Court Hymns*) and *Xiaoya* 小雅 (*Lesser Court Hymns*) sections of this source. Both the *Daya* and *Xiaoya* belonged to the *Court Hymns* section of *The Book of Odes*, which included ceremonial poems that were used by the aristocracy to pray for good harvests each year, worship gods and venerate their ancestors. These sections were regarded as sacred in ancient China, and when deployed for admonishing purposes, they reinforced the ritual frame by which the paradoxical admonishing Suggest was realised. The importance of this discursive practice becomes particularly noticeable when one compares the frequency with which the *Daya* and *Xiaoya* quotes occur in our corpus with the respective size of these sections in *The Book of Odes* (see Table 5).

*Guofeng* – which constitutes by far the largest section of *The Book of Odes* according to Table 5 – was very rarely used in admonishing, as shown in Table 4 above. Although the *Guofeng* Section formed part of the sacred classical text, *The Book of Odes*, and was therefore revered in ancient China, it only included poems which detailed the lives of ordinary people and, as such, was arguably irrelevant in the context of an admonishment. As our corpus shows, the admonisher most

**Table 5.** The size of the sections of *The Book of Odes* quoted in admonishing

Section	Number of poems
<i>Guofeng Section</i>	160
<i>Xiaoya Section</i>	74
<i>Zhou Song Section</i>	40
<i>Daya Section</i>	31

frequently criticised the ruler by referring either to a sacred poem which ritually represented the appropriate ceremonial behaviour of ancient aristocracy or, in a similar fashion, to *The Book of Documents* which included sacred prose about the deeds performed by ancient rulers.

Returning to the paradox we focus on in this paper, the quoting of sacred texts appears to be a particularly powerful way to criticise the ruler. By referring to such a sacred text, which was regarded, unanimously, to be authoritative and was in stark contrast with the current ruler’s behaviour, the admonisher unavoidably challenged the ruler’s authority. It is thus not a coincidence that, in those examples which feature the discursive practice of quoting, the admonisher almost always rather robustly downgraded the impact of this challenge, in both linguistic and non-linguistic ways. The following example illustrates this point:

- (8) 士蔦稽首而對曰：“臣聞之，無喪而戚，憂必仇焉。無戎而城，仇必保焉。寇仇之保，又何慎焉！守官廢命不敬，固仇之保不忠，失忠與敬，何以事君？《詩》雲：‘懷德惟寧，宗子惟城。’君其修德而固宗子，何城如之？”三年將尋師焉，焉用慎？”《左傳》

Shiwei prostrated himself in front of the king and said: “I, this minister (chen) , have heard that if one mourns with no reason, trouble is certain to approach. Also, if one builds city walls without a war looming, the enemy is certain to occupy these walls. Now, as our city walls will be occupied by our enemies, why should we attempt to finish and fortify them? [I was criticised by my superior for the quality of the walls, saying that] I have not been following orders to build the wall, and also saying that I have been disrespectful to the sovereign. But if I fortify our walls just to profit our enemy, this would be lack of loyalty to our state. If respect and loyalty are lost, how can I serve you, my lord (jun)? *The Book of Odes* says: ‘Being kind to people brings peace to the state, and the family of the ruler will be as firm and strong as a wall.’ If you, my lord (jun) must cultivate your morality and reinforce your family’s position, is this not much better than erecting walls? I believe that it will be three years before we need to wage war, so why are we now troubled about the walls?

(Zuo zhuan)

As shown in Example (8), not only does the admonisher use some of the RFIEs that we examined in Section 4.1, but he also indicates his utmost reverence to the ruler by kowtowing in front of him and realising the admonishment from the floor of the audience room. Although it was the custom for admonishing officials to kowtow in front of their ruler, the fact that the text mentions this deferential act appears to be salient, considering that the source *Zuozhuan* in which the example occurs does not frequently mention kowtowing. It is also important to note that the quote in the above example is taken from the sacred *Daya* section of *The Book of Odes*, and this gives strong ritual power to the admonishment.

In a number of examples in our corpus, the person realising an admonishing appears to ‘overwhelm’ the ruler with his use of historical quotes. The following Example (9) illustrates this ‘overwhelming’ practice:

- (9) 對曰：“舜之罪也殛鯀，其舉也興禹。管敬仲，桓之賊也，實相以濟。  
 《康誥》曰：‘父不慈，子不祗，兄不友，弟不共，不相及也。’《詩》  
 曰：‘採葑採菲，無以下體。’君取節焉可也。”《左傳》  
 Jiu Ji replied: “Formerly, Shun<sup>12</sup> put Gun to death according to the law, but he  
 raised Yu, son of Gun. Guan Jingzhong<sup>13</sup> was an enemy of Duke Huan of Qi,  
 but the duke appointed him as his Minister and he served the duke with loyalty.  
 The Kanggao<sup>14</sup> says: ‘If one’s father lacks kindness, a son lacks reverence,  
 an elder brother lacks friendship and a younger brother lacks respect, it is  
 them and not their kin who should be punished.’ *The Book of Odes* says:  
 ‘When you gather the turnips and the radishes you do not throw away the  
 roots and eat only the leaves.’ When you, my lord (*jun*), appoint a person, you  
 must make use of his strength.” (*Zuozhuan*)

In this case, the admonisher only expresses his own opinion in the very last sentence of the admonishment, with the body of the admonishment being either quotations or references to historical figures.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have focused on admonishing in ancient China. Our argument has been that admonishing is not a distinct speech act type. Instead, it needs to be subsumed under the speech act category Suggest. We have also argued that admonishing is historically embedded, i.e. it is a realisation type of Suggest which

12. Shun and Yu, mentioned in this section, were sacred mythical rulers.

13. Guan Jingzhong or Guan Zhong (d. 645 BC) was a philosopher and politician.

14. *Kanggao* is a chapter of *The Book of Documents*.

existed in an institutionalised, ceremonial form in ancient China. To capture the pragmatic features of admonishing as a historically embedded phenomenon, we have deployed the analytic procedure we outlined in Figure 1, by focusing on the expressions and discursive practices through which this speech act realisation type operated. We have pointed out that the pragmatic features of admonishing in ancient China are seemingly paradoxical when viewed from a modern etic perspective.

The paradox that we have identified in our analysis is the following: in many historical linguacultures, an admonishment was directed at a recipient of significantly higher ranking than the admonisher himself. In no other circumstances was it acceptable to criticise the ruler because of the absolute power and sacred, celestial-like status with which ancient rulers were invested. Certain historical systems of governance, like that of ancient China, permitted admonishing, insofar as this act occurred within a ceremonial ritual frame of interaction, which created a protected discursive environment for the safe operation of the admonishment without challenging the ruler's authority beyond what was absolutely necessary. This 'protection' did not necessarily mean that it was always safe to admonish the ruler, because the admonisher could be executed or demoted. The ritual frame indicated by conventionalised retaliations of admonishing Suggest helped to reduce the dangers associated with admonishing, as these dangers would have been considerably greater if the admonishing had unfolded as a non-ritual *ad hoc* act.

Our inquiry has revealed that the admonishing includes linguistic expressions and discursive practices which increase, rather than decrease, the face- and power-threat implied by admonishing. The existence of these expressions and discursive practices is direct evidence for the existence of the aforementioned paradox. As we have argued, expressions indicating that an admonishment was taking place can be described as RFIEs because they were conventionalised and, as such, were part of a ritual frame. In a similar way, the frequency with which the two discursive practices of referring to historical figures and quoting ancient authoritative sources were employed during the ritual realisation of admonishing Suggest, has revealed that these were conventionalised pragmatic devices. The existence of these various expressions and discursive practices do not imply that admonishing was only realised in a direct manner. Rather, as our analysis has shown, admonishing was frequently downgraded by the use of honorific expressions indicating acceptance of the ruler's authority.

It is worth emphasising again that the paradox revealed in our analysis might simply exist because we are only able to approach historical data, such as the corpus analysed in this paper, from a modern etic perspective. For the ancient Chinese people, and even for those living in later imperial Chinese eras when the ritual of admonishing was still commonplace, this form of behaviour might not

have appeared paradoxical at all. We need to remember that the paradox is important mainly for disentangling the differences between admonishing and other realisation types of the speech act. Suggest. In future research, it would be fruitful to consider whether other historically embedded speech acts and realisation of types of these speech acts appear in a similar paradoxical fashion.

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